



MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION OF RAILROAD PASSENGERS, INC.

a non-profit Michigan corporation founded in 1973
advocating improved intercity and metropolitan rail passenger services

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Comments of the Michigan Association of Railroad Passengers On the 2005 Five-year Michigan DOT Transportation Plan

We favor the restoration of all applicable sales taxes to the Comprehensive Transportation Fund (CTF). We also urge that M-DOT work to assure that any increase in diesel fuel taxes be apportioned to the CTF as originally intended by the legislature when the modal division of revenues was established. Further, we urge that M-DOT work to assure that non-highway programs receive the full 10% of funds allowed by the State Constitution.

In the Highways and Roads portion, we urge that the Department try killing two birds with one stone- grade crossing separations are needed throughout the state, but the current program of doing 'one here, one there' really doesn't make that much of an impact. We urge that grade crossing separations on Amtrak lines be given preference, with top priority being given to those crossings with the most passenger trains per day. This will accomplish two objectives at once: (1) it will get grade crossings eliminated in an orderly manner, and (2) move the state's high speed rail program along at a faster pace without increasing spending.

We believe there should be more effort at developing seamless intermodal transportation which benefits both the bus and passenger rail systems. Bus services which offer through ticketing between bus and Amtrak should be encouraged and connections tightened to make these services more attractive to the public. We believe there is a need for the following specific bus/rail connecting services:

Grand Rapids-Kalamazoo: bus connections from Grand Rapids to Kalamazoo connecting to Amtrak trains 353 and 355; bus connection from Kalamazoo to Grand Rapids connecting from Amtrak trains 350 and 352.

Saginaw-Flint: bus connection from Saginaw to Flint to connect with train 365; bus from Flint to Saginaw connecting from train 364. A prior attempt at this connection failed because the train ran on an odd schedule on Sundays. That is not the case now, since the restructuring of this service now provides the same schedule seven days a week.

In addition, we favor developing new bus/train connections. The initial demand for these services would almost certainly not justify a full-sized highway bus. However, we urge the department to be creative and consider contracting with limousine operators to provide dedicated connections as described below. The cost of using limousines instead of buses would make these services very inexpensive. We believe the following routes hold promise:

Mt. Pleasant- East Lansing: to connect with trains 365 and 364 at East Lansing.

Lansing-Jackson-Ann Arbor-Toledo: to connect to Amtrak trains to and from New York and Washington D.C. This routing would save a considerable amount of time used by the current bus, which carries light loads from these cities due to its roundabout routing. Dearborn and Detroit would continue to be served by the existing bus, which requires no subsidy.

Port Huron-Detroit: to connect with Amtrak trains 353, 355, 350 and 352 at Detroit. This would give Port Huron area passengers three roundtrip options per day, and would be a fast and simple connect to operate.

Intercity rail capital projects: Our top priority is restoring a track connection at West Detroit between Norfolk Southern and Canadian National. This would take 5-7 minutes out of the schedule and eliminate several minutes of agonizingly slow running.

Our second priority is getting enough cars to carry the existing demand. Many trains are running sold out, particularly on weekends and always over holiday periods. Amtrak has over 100 cars awaiting repairs. We urge that M-DOT pay for repair of several cars on the condition that they are assigned to the state-supported trains. The additional ridership and revenue will go a long way toward offsetting the cost of these repairs, and should hold down the subsidy requirements of these trains. The Grand Rapids and Port Huron trains are routinely producing double-digit ridership increases which we attribute to higher gas prices. We see little chance of significant gas price declines in the near future. In fact, as China's population continues to upgrade from bicycles to motorbikes and cars, we expect more upward pressure on gasoline prices.

Increase usage and revenues of current Amtrak Service.

Currently, Amtrak trains run with very light loads from Pontiac to Ann Arbor, and return. We suggest that fares between Pontiac, Birmingham, Royal Oak, Detroit, Dearborn and Ann Arbor be dropped to the same level that SMART offers between the same points. Getting some revenue is better than getting no revenue, and empty seats produce no revenue. Such a program would also help introduce new riders to passenger train service.

In short, we believe that a convenient seamless public transportation system is in the interests of both the state government and its citizens. A wide array of public transportation choices keeps the state commercially competitive, and makes our cities more attractive places to work, live and invest.

John DeLora,
Executive Director